

Fathers Of The Atom

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Summary: Ever Wonder what Magnus ad Xavier would have been like in a world without superpowered mutants?

Fathers Of The Atom

SPIFFY DISCLAIMER THINGIE!!!

I don't own them (mores the pity!); they're Marvel's and Ah'm usin'em without permission:)) Ah ain't makin' a plug nickel! If ya'll sue me Magnus is gonna be right peeved ...

Rated PG-17 for implied sexual content and some verbal violence and a couple of naughty words. So if those sort of things bother ya'll, skedaddle:))

Before anyone has a cow, yes, I know the chronology is off. You just have to imagine that Charles and Magnus were born about ten years earlier is all:)) I hope the story is worth that small sacrifice.

A note of personal thanks to all my beta readers! Especially my new friend Sigil for betaing above and beyond the call of duty and for suggesting the title of this story. Bless ya'll:)) Any mistakes in grammar, spelling, continuity, characterization and such that are left are entirely mine. That said: On with the story!

Fathers Of The Atom An Elsewhens Tale by Dannell Lites

I brought the Jeep to a slow halt and just sat there for a long time, trembling like a leaf. It was useless to hope that I wouldn't find him here. Of course he would be here. Where else would he go but here where it all began? Oh yes, Magnus would be here.

It was growing too dark to see very well. But I didn't need my eyes to guide me. After all, I'd lived here for more than two years. With no difficulty at all I remembered the beaten earth streets of our fanciful "Atomville". It was still there, just at the junction of

"Proton Blvd" and "Electron Way": #1 "Radiation Plaza". And they say that scientists have no sense of humor. Magnus did his best to discourage such flippancy. He insisted that we had a most serious task to perform here. But Ede refused to be cowed by our youthful European genius. Teller can be very stubborn at times. He does, after all insist upon being called Edward. He wanted so very badly to be an American. Ede would stomp about on his wooden foot brandishing his cane. He hated being Hungarian. "My name is Edward," he would insist with a forced smile, "It's a fine American name!" I suppose it was his way of expressing his dismay. It's not every day that an eminent naturalized American physicist is overlooked in favor of a much younger foreigner. Poor Ede. And I never even told him how much General Groves would rather he had been Director of "The Manhattan Project" than Magnus. Leslie once described Magnus as, "The most brilliant, disorganized son of a bitch I ever worked with." But then Leslie was a Quartermaster Corps soldier and such trivial matters as schedules and deadlines were important to him. They never were to Magnus.

Teller was always convinced it was because Magnus was German that he was chosen to lead the Project. "Much more romantic than being Hungarian," he mourned to me once while in his cups. He was almost snarling. "I hate him!" he cried, draining his glass.

"Why?" I wondered, honestly baffled.

"Because he's not the same as you or even I," Teller whispered. "He's different. Look at the way his mind works, for God's sake! He sprints forward and the best we mere mortals can do is to stumble after him marveling at his superiority."

My body didn't seem to want to cooperate when I stepped out of the Jeep into the cold night air of the Pajarito Plateau. But I forced myself. There was no sense in putting it off any longer.

Damn! I'd forgotten my jacket again. Moira would be angry with me. Unbidden I could hear my wife's strong voice, echoing ghost-like through the labyrinth of my mind. "Charles Francis Xavier! Come back here ye daft Yank! Can ye nae remember yair coat? And ye with such a quick mind! But no room in it for common things is there?" With a smile I spied my hat lying on the passenger side seat. Well, at least I hadn't forgotten that this time. For a bald man a good hat is essential in the summer. Especially here in New Mexico. I'd made good time, it seems. But then Los Alamos is only 40 miles from Sante Fe, after all. I passed Moira's small infirmary down by the pond, huddling in the shadow of the motor pool. Not far to go now.

Coming here through Stallion Gate was my first mistake. It led me right past Trinity Site. I hope you can't imagine what that was like. Project Y Site was still classified so I found myself being very careful as I cruised past on my mission of mercy. I recall wondering briefly if old George MacDonald was still complaining of the use to which we put his decrepit farm. That's where we had carefully assembled The Gadget; right there in the miserable dour old Scot's sheep barn. "Little Boy" was an official code name. We never used it. To us, the men and women who built it, it was always referred to as "The Gadget". Magnus hated the name, of course. He said it trivialized our achievement. He never understood that we *had* to trivialize what we were doing. That was the only way we could deal with it. Of course, he disliked "Little Boy" even more. Magnus may be

blessed with many great gifts of intellect and character, but a sense of humor has never been among them, I'm afraid. I think I've only seen him smile once. In fact, I can recall the exact date.

July 16, 1945 was hellishly hot as I remember, even at such an early hour of the morning as 5:30AM. And, of course, I'd forgotten my hat. I was destined to once again suffer the discomfort and indignity of yet another sunburn upon my bald pate. There are other reasons, of course, why I shall never, ever forget that day. But Magnus' smile is definitely one of them.

"It works!" he cried. "We've done it!" And as he joyously watched the soon-to-be familiar mushroom shaped symbol of his success spread brightly on the horizon, Eric Magnus Lehnsherr smiled like the sun whose atomic fire he had just called down from the heavens to briefly kiss the earth.

I was almost there now. Somehow I didn't remember it as such a long walk. It's less than a mile. No distance at all really. But then Hell is only a heartbeat away and that's no great distance either. I'd have been there sooner but when I came upon "The Dragon's Lair" I found I could go no further. I mean that quite literally. My feet refused to move. This was where we had "tickled the Dragon's tail" ... I don't remember who first called it that. I think it might have been Fermi. It sounds very like Enrico. I know it wasn't me. My eyes closed in pain. It was hard to believe now that we were ever so foolish, ever so naive. Magnus always insisted on being present. Leslie's curses and my pleas fell on equally deaf ears.

("I don't want you anywhere near that shit!" Groves thundered at him as if the sheer volume of his voice would carry the day, "You're too important to risk, you stupid bastard!" "If I were a 'stupid bastard'," came Magnus' succinct, ironic reply, "I wouldn't be so important.")

("Magnus, please," I urged him, "think about Magda ..." He had nothing to say to that.)

Just the memory of what was done here in this unremarkable white wooden building made me sweat even in the frigid grip of the desert twilight. In my nightmares I still see those two smooth beryllium spheres filled with subcritical masses of uranium, approaching one another so slowly, so cautiously. I can still hear the steadily raising click of the radiation counter as they drew closer and closer, separated only by Louis Slotin's small screwdriver. If his hand should slip ...

Magnus was very disappointed in me. "For God's sake, Charles you should know better!" he chided me. "It's not as if the thing will explode. And we must discover the range of criticality. How close must the two subcritical masses be before they interact? Really, there's no other way." One of the many, many infuriating things about Magnus is that he is almost always right. And so like Siegfried before us we "tickled the Dragon's tail". We should never have been surprised when it burned us with its fire.

It was several moments before my legs succumbed to my will and I could walk again. My steps quickened.

Colonel Tibbets was coping very well, I thought if my talk with him

just the previous week was any indication. That was a good sign, I told myself. "Don't worry about me, Doc," Paul was firm. "They grow'em *tough* in Illinois." They did indeed. Losing the plane was especially difficult for him. "The Enola Gay and I have been through a lot," he mourned quietly when the Army shipped he and his crew back to Honolulu but left his plane on Tinian Island. "Being hauled around like freight's undignified," he grumbled. But the 509th Composite Bomb Group was officially defunct and that was his only ticket home. The tall lanky airman was a born flyer. The best pilot we had for the tempermental B-29 "Superfortress", in fact. That's why he was chosen. It hadn't been easy for Paul. Imagine delivering death and destruction on a heretofore unheard of scale ... in an airplane named for your mother. Still, if Paul could live with what he had done, then perhaps there was also hope for Magnus.

Leslie once advised Magnus to, "Pull that poker out of your ass, son!" Magnus was livid. He was always far too serious for his own good and very sensitive about his age and dignity. He was so young, you see. We all tended to forget how young he is. He is only 23. It is difficult not to lose sight of the sheltered, unsure young man in the glare of the light from the brilliant, arrogant physicist. I cannot picture Magnus as a young boy, happily playing kick the can with the other boys. I cannot. Not that he was ever allowed to be young, mind you. When he was 10 he was already correcting his physics and mathematics professors at the University of Munich. He celebrated his 16th birthday at the University of Liepzig with the publication of his doctoral thesis "Molecular Bonding In The Hydrogen Ion". It wasn't Heisenberg's fault that he soon ran out of things to teach Magnus. When that happened Werner did the only thing he could ... he sent Magnus to Nils Bohr in Denmark. In less than a year Magnus was a fellow of The Institute For Theoretical Physics. Yes, it's very easy to forget how young Magnus is. He works so very hard at being old.

My heart sank. In the distance I could make out the soft glow of lights. Well, there was no doubt of his presence now. Why was I so reluctant to face him I wondered? Guilt? I refused to let it be that simple. Nothing about what I feel for Magnus is simple. He is at once my child and the father I can barely remember. He is my dearest friend and when he can't stand the pressure of all that inchoate pain and he lashes out, he is a most terrible enemy. Freud would have had a field day. As The Father Of Psychoanalysis' devoted student I cringed when I thought upon it. No one stirs me like Magnus. His company is like soaring on the wind. He angers me, he brings me joy and when all is said and done he makes me feel more alive than anyone else I know. Is that love? I cannot say. But, if not, it will suffice.

The steps leading into the Administration building are few but they are steep and my legs still pain me occasionally to remind me of the folly of Kasserine Pass. I grunted as I mounted them. I know he must have heard me but still there came no sound from within. Drawing a deep breath I drew the door open and plunged inside. And there he was, sitting at his sprawling untidy desk as I had so often seen him, absorbed, wrestling with God, forcing Him to divulge the structure of His Universe.

I have always envied Magnus his hair. Trite for a bald man but nonetheless true. Ede lusted to possess Magnus' mind. I lust to possess that mane of silver hair. I watched him now silently for several

moments his pen flashing. He was thin, so very thin ... His body cried out for flesh. His rumpled suit hung limply from his broad shoulders and I wondered how long he had been here without food or sleep. That glorious hair that I so coveted hung disheveled and unkempt. His lean cheeks gleamed with pale unshaven stubble and my heart clenched. I'd seen Magnus like this before and it never failed to frightened me. He has always been moody, prone to great pendulum-like swings of joy and sadness. But when he looked up at me his blue-gray eyes were calm. Perhaps too calm.

"Charles," he said, "I've had another thought."

That's what he always called them, his great leaps of intellect and inspiration; "thoughts".

"Magnus ..." I began, my voice hollow even in my own ears. With a wave of his hand he cut me off. That's when I saw the glossy 8x10 photographs casually littering the top of his desk. Damn. I have no idea how he'd gotten them. I'd advised Leslie not to let him see them. But there they were. The eight year old boy, the flesh of his legs burned away to expose the bone is the worst, I think. But the one of the young woman, the delicate pattern of the chrysanthemums gracing her silk kimono branded into her flesh is the one that haunts me. I still see it in my dreams.

"It's really quite simple," Magnus continued, rising to face the blackboard at his back. The mathematics were far beyond me, of course. But Magnus' explanation was easy enough to understand. "It occurred to me," my friend said, "that if you can split an atom and release the energy inherent in its molecular bonds then you can fuse them together just as easily. And release even more energy. Of course the temperatures required to spark that fusion aren't easy to come by. For that you need quite a powerful energy source. A rather large match, if you will. I'm ashamed to say I wasted quite a bit of time looking for that before the obvious occurred to me. What was it that Albert was forever saying? 'If it had been a snake it would have bitten me'!"

With colored chalk he began to draw. Three circles one inside the other. He tapped the inner circle. "Here we have a small amount of deuterium and tritium held in liquid suspension." He tapped the middle circle. "Surrounded here by an atomic bomb; our 'match' as it were ... I recommend a plutonium device along the lines of Fat Man. Much simpler and safer to work with." He looked rueful for a moment. "Edward was right about that." I almost smiled when I considered how very much Ede would have relished that small confession. "We must always consider the safety of others, Charles." Magnus said. His eyes were fever bright. He tapped the outermost circle.

"And then we encompass the entire thing with a large charge of TNT. We use the TNT to detonate the atomic bomb which in turn will fuse the hydrogen ions of the deuterium and tritium suspension. I estimate a yield of close to 400 kilotons. Quite an improvement over the mere 10 kilotons with which we recently blessed our late enemies in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What do you think?" The chalk snapped in his spasming hand and fell to the floor with a tiny clatter. I bit my lip until I tasted blood.

"I think," I said softly, "that it isn't your fault." He stared at me wide-eyed as if I'd lost my mind. Perhaps I had.

"Magnus," I pleaded, "you mustn't -"

"Mustn't I?" he demanded and there was a storm gathering behind his eyes. "Once did not content them, Charles. They did it twice. Hiroshima *and* Nagasaki. They raped me twice."

"Albert wrote the damned letter," I snapped.

"'Lehnsherr's new phenomenon," he quoted Einstien's stiff prose, "would also lead to the construction of bombs and it is conceivable -- though not certain -- that extremely powerful bombs of this type may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port might very well destroy the entire port together with some of the surrounding area. However such bombs might well prove too heavy for transport by air.'" There are many benefits that come with an eidetic memory such as Magnus'. I did not think this was one of them. Magnus closed his eyes.

"He was almost right, you know ..." he admitted. "The cursed thing was too heavy. If we hadn't been able to make it smaller it might well have been useless as a weapon. And then along I came and showed them how to accomplish even that. It wasn't enough that I showed them how to release all that energy. I'm too damn good an engineer, Charles."

"It brought an end to a brutal war," I pointed out even though I knew my efforts at comfort were doomed to failure. Magnus embraces nothing by half measures, be it love or grief. His face paled and he reached out to steady himself on his desk.

"It destroyed everything!" he cried, "Devastated and incinerated anything in its path; homes and factories, temples and monuments centuries old ..." He clutched at me as if he were drowning. I grabbed him tightly and held on.

"... and one hundred fourteen thousand eight hundred people ..." he whispered.

"Thus far." I thought. If Moira's suspicions were to be believed there would be death and dying in Hiroshima for many years to come. Gently, he lay his head on my shoulder like an exhausted child. I stroked his hair. I do not know if he wept. I doubt it very much. But I did.

"Erik ... please don't do this."

There are not many who are privileged to call him by his first name. I have occasionally found myself one of them. I was desperate to reach him, you see.

"Magda is gone," he murmured and his shoulders shook. "She ran away from me. 'Don't touch me!' she shouted when I pleaded with her to return. 'Monster!' she accused. 'All those innocent people!'"

There was nothing I could do but hold him. And, in the end, he wouldn't even let me do that.

"Get away from me!" he hissed and gave me a violent shove. I stumbled back and my right knee buckled beneath me. The pain of it made me

clench my teeth but that was nothing to the agony of Magnus' next words.

"I don't need you!" He towered over me as I lay helpless on the floor and shook his fist at me in fury. "I don't want you and I don't want her! I want you to leave me alone. I want everyone to leave me alone. Especially *you*, you pathetic cripple."

They tell me I am lucky to still have the use of my legs at all. The knowledge does not help when I must sometimes struggle to raise from a chair or when my knees curse me with every step I take and I must accept the humiliation of a proffered hand. Magnus understands that. Never once has he lessened me in my own eyes with some hurtful kindness. Until now. Of course, knowing someone as well as Magnus and I know each other is a two edged sword. Without thought, I swung that sword now wishing to see him bleed. As I was bleeding.

"And what about *you*, Juden?" I said carefully in harsh German.

I knew that I had lost him then. Lost him to his inner demons and his pride. Of course, I knew why he had done it. He wanted to push me away in more ways than just the one. And I, in my own foolish pride, had let him. I watched as he stalked out the door, alone, into the night. Always alone.

"Magnus! Wait! Come back!" But my voice never reached him. There was only the sound of the night wind, its sibilant moans mourning the loss of the light as the sun set.

Much like myself.

From the Journal of Charles Xavier July 16, 1965

I lost track of him after that. For a time he went to Israel. He buried himself in the new nation's struggle for Independence. I have heard that he even tried to fight as a common soldier. But it did him no good. When the Knesset offered to make him the first head of the State of Israel in two thousand years, he fled. And then he vanished; simply disappeared.

"Why won't they leave me be?" he cried in the last letter I ever received from him. "I only want to be left alone!" I had no answer for him.

It was then that I first heard from Father de Vries, a polite but worried inquiry concerning Magnus' whereabouts. I didn't have an answer for him either, I'm afraid. That thin, self effacing Dutch priest is a man of great character, however. After all, could *you* maintain a correspondence with the man who was responsible for the death of many of your friends and loved ones? Even forgive him and try to comfort him? I'm not sure I could. At first I couldn't imagine why Magnus had cultivated his friendship. A quiet, all but unknown 52 year old Catholic priest serving a peaceful Dutch farm community? What could he possibly have in common with Erik Magnus Lehnsherr, then 27 year old physicist and tortured visionary? I found out of course. On August 6, 1945 (at 8:15 AM to be exact) Father Pieter de

Vries was prelate at a small Catholic Mission dedicated to the healing of the sick.

In Hiroshima, Japan.

The good Father survived and it was he and his brethren who took in and cared for many of the injured and the dying on that historic day. He was one of the first to see the hideous effects of radiation; the pain, the twisting and distorting of the flesh, the horrible burns and slow lingering death. I have always been a great lover of the future with all its myriad possibilities. Science fiction is still one of my favorite genres of literature. Quite often in badly written science fiction one can find reference to "anti - radiation vaccine" or some such thing. It used to make me smile. Considering the effects of radiation and the brutal damage it inflicts on the human body that's rather like claiming to be inoculated against assault and battery. I saw some of the pictures taken of Hiroshima's sufferers in the aftermath of what we did to them. I don't smile any more. Father Pieter says that Magnus' letters were like cries in the night, quiet wails of despair in their stiff and formal way. I don't doubt him for an instant.

Magda remarried, eventually. She and Gregor are quite happy and I am the proud god-father of their children. I remember the depths of Magda's sorrow when she lost Magnus' child in the terror of their flight from Denmark to the safety of England and then the US. It grieves me to think how desperately she wished then to give her husband that gift of immortality. "The world will be so much less when there is no one else like him!" she mourned. Wanda and Pietro are quite a handful. Magda tells me that she thanks God every day now that they are nothing like their father. B's and C's on their report cards are good enough for her. I don't believe that she would tell Erik about them even if she knew how to go about it. But sometimes when she isn't paying attention I catch her watching the good but ordinary man she married and her beautiful but blessedly ordinary children and I cannot help but wonder if she regrets now what she did so long ago. Gregor Maximoff is no Magnus.

In 1948 the International Committee awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics to Erik Magnus Lehnsherr. "For his contribution to the advancement of the human condition" the plaque said.

He wasn't there to accept it, of course. I still have it sitting on my mantle. I cover it discreetly with a large photo of my son David in his MIT graduation robes whenever Magda visits.

It's been over twenty years now. And yet the world will not let him alone. They still search for him; they will not grant him the peace he craves. Should I? Yes, I should, I know that. If it were not for Moira's quiet phone call early this morning I would not even consider disturbing him. He does not want to be found that is obvious. But he would want to hear my news. He has a right to hear it. I can still hear my wife's calm voice, her soft burr distorted by inefficient telephone wires.

"Magda passed on about half an hour ago, Charles. I'm so sorry, luv ... Is there nae anything I can do?" I told her no. She understood.

It isn't as if it were unexpected, Magda's death. Lung cancer takes

its own sweet time claiming its victims. But, I've run out of time now. I have to make a decision. I've known for quite some time where he is. In its own way it makes perfect sense if you know Magnus as well as I do. I'm a little surprised no one else has discovered him by now. Still, he *is* hiding in the very last spot on earth you might expect.

In the end there is only one decision I can make, really. I'll have to be careful. Not even my aide can know. Scott keeps many of my secrets very well. But not this one. It's a long journey and I can't use my position as National Science Advisor to get me there. Too conspicuous. No, this is not a job for Senator Charles Xavier. It's been a long time since I've flown on a commercial airline. I reach for the phone.

I wonder how much it costs to fly to Japan these days?

The End.

HISTORICAL NOTES

To those of you who are curious it shouldn't be too hard to discover Magnus' real life counterpart in The Nuclear Saga. He's the only one of the major players not mentioned by name in "Fathers Of The Atom". His actual fate was much worse than Magnus' and he was a much braver man. He didn't run away.

Albert Einstien's letter to Harry Truman is, of course, an actual historical document and I have quoted it faithfully.

Father de Vries is quite real (although that isn't his name). He and his brother priests were practically at ground zero of the Hiroshima blast, in fact. That's why they survived. And they did, indeed, take in and care for the survivors. He even wrote a book about it.

Lastly ...

In point of fact Louis Slotin's hand did slip. While "tickling the Dragon's tail", Mr. Slotin received a fatal dose of full body radiation in excess of 11,000 rad; as much as 30,000 rad on his hands. He died nine days later. There were six other scientists present and Louis Slotin's quick thinking and sacrifice saved their lives. But all the people present that day were injured in some fashion. Most of them experienced health problems thereafter.

Dannell Lites

End
file.